

THE PIRATE LIFE

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Mark 8:31-38

Late in August, just before my daughter headed back to college, my wife and daughter and I took an end-of-summer vacation over to Charleston, South Carolina. We had not been there as a family and going there has been on our list for quite some time. It was an easy-going trip with no agenda other than to explore the city and eat good food. Charleston is a beautiful, historic, coastal city. It was founded in 1670 and named for King Charles II. It is an exceptional city to visit, however, I can tell you from experience, that in August Charleston is miserably hot. It was 95 degrees with a humidity level of 110 to 120 percent.

One morning we spent just walking around the city. We had eaten breakfast and visited an art museum. By late morning we had taken about all we could of the head and decided to return to our hotel and cool off and then head to one of the surrounding beach communities. So we started walking back to our car. One other thing about Charleston is that unless you are a resident with a parking permit there is no available on-street parking. Honestly, back in 1670, I don't think they planned the city very well. The streets are too narrow for cars. To combat this problem, the city built a number of parking garages. And because they have a monopoly on these garages, they can charge \$700 an hour for parking. We had parked in one of these garages down near the Battery and had gotten the very last spot which happened to be up on the roof of the garage. (I could see Fort Sumpter from my car.) I figured that being in the open like that, the car would be like an oven, so I suggested to the girls that they wait in this little park under the trees while I went to get the car. Maybe by the time I drove down five levels the car might have cooled off a bit. Surprisingly, they didn't argue with me.

Parking garages are always a little unsettling. In the movies, people always meet violent ends in parking garages. So as I entered I was on alert. I walked into the garage and around the corner toward the elevator. No one was around but still I maintained parking lot vigilance scanning all around me.

As I waited, a man approached the elevator. From the corner of my eye, as he neared me, I sensed that something was different about him. First of all, his hair was long and gray. Some of it was tied back in a ponytail. But mostly, his hair was stuck to his face with sweat. His shirt was a dingy white and ill-fitting and opened too far down his chest. The collars were far too large. Then, as I looked closer, I saw that he had a gun. It was strapped to his waist. But that wasn't all. On the other hip, he had a sword. When I was finally able to look at the man fully I could see the hair and the shirt and the boots and the wool pants and the gun and the sword. This was a pirate. This wasn't a Halloween costume; this was legitimate pirate..

Now, I love pirates. When I was a kid my father would tell me about the pirates that sailed up and down the Gulf Coast near where we lived. The most celebrated pirate in our area was (the probably fictitious) Billy Bowlegs. My father would tell me about how the pirates would come ashore and bury their treasure. And when we would go to the beach, he would tell me that I should start digging. There may be pirate treasure here. And I would spend all day digging holes in the sand. It wasn't until much later that I figured out that they were just distracting me.

But still, 10-year-old me was fascinated with pirates. What a life they must have led! Pirates didn't work; they just took what they wanted. They lived on a ship with their mates and traveled the world. No one told them what to do. No one told them to brush their teeth. They drank rum out of barrels. And they sang yo-ho-ho. The really cool ones had an eye patch, or a hook, or a peg leg.

In Charleston, we had already taken an historical tour and the guide had talked about the pirates that had been central to the city's history. The most famous of these was William Teach, also known as Blackbeard. In the early 1700s, Blackbeard's fleet had laid siege to the harbor capturing any ships that tried to enter or leave.

And here I was, in Charleston, about to ride on an elevator with a pirate. The 10-year-old in me was very excited.

We got onto the elevator and it turns out that we were both going to the same floor, to the roof. So now I have to say something. "What kind of work do you do?" I asked because I really had no idea and was very curious. He said to me, "I give pirate tours." That made sense. I had seen pirate tours advertised among the dozens of other types of tours one could take in Charleston. He went on to tell me that he had given two tours that morning and that now he had had to go home and clean up because he had to get to the dentist. He had a crown that we was pretty sure needed replacing. Then he had to go meet his wife at the insurance adjusters because her car had been hit in a parking lot. Then he had to get his daughter to soccer practice. That night he was scheduled to go to one of the resorts up the coast for a corporate gig. Then the elevator opened at our floor and we got off and he walked over and got into his white minivan. And 10-year-old me was very disappointed. I had finally met a pirate and he didn't lead the life that I had long dreamed of. He lived in the suburbs and sailed around in a minivan. He had a wife and children. He went to the dentist and dealt with the mundane details of life. He ran a small business and probably paid taxes.

Sometimes, that's how life is. We build up these expectations and fantasies and they don't match up with reality.

We find this playing out in today's reading from the gospel of Mark. Here, Jesus, for the first time, begins to explain to his disciples what is going to happen to

him. He tells them quite plainly that he will undergo great suffering; he is going to be rejected by their leaders. And, he is going to be killed.

Peter is not pleased with this turn of events. As the “leader” of the disciples, he stands up for the other guys when he pulls Jesus aside and quietly but sternly suggests that he stop talking this way. The men don’t want to hear about suffering and dying. It’s bad for morale.

Just a moment before, Jesus had been asking the disciples who the people say that he is. The disciples report on the chatter they have heard among the crowds. They tell Jesus that some say he is John the Baptist, or maybe Elijah, or possibly one of the prophets. But then, Jesus asks them who they believe him to be and Peter pipes up, *You are the Messiah*. This, of course, is the correct answer. But it is also not the correct answer. Jesus is the Messiah—the one sent by God to save God’s people. However, in Jewish tradition, this Hebrew word messiah was commonly associated with an anointed king, a royal figure from the line of Dave. That messiah was expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors. That messiah would purify the people. That messiah would restore Israel’s independence and glory.¹

That is the messiah that the disciples were expecting. They had witnessed Jesus’ power. They recognized in him messiah material. It was their plan to hitch themselves to the messiah wagon. They wanted to ride along to glory. Peter wanted what any of us would want in a savior—someone who is strong and powerful, who can rescue us from our troubles, and make everything right.

But this was not Jesus. And so he looks to the disciples and loudly says to Peter, *Get behind me, Satan! You’ve got this all wrong. You are setting your minds not on divine things but on human things*. And it was true. Their expectations of the messiah did not match with the person of Jesus.

Jesus explains to them how it must be. His followers, he says, must *deny themselves and take up their cross... Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it*. What good is it to have everything and yet forfeit their life?

I know that if I’m going to choose a savior, I’m going to choose the one who will be a winner and who will make me a winner (or least make me appear to be a winner). A suffering, rejected, executed savior is by definition not a winner. This one does not meet our expectations. To die by the cross is the clearest definition of loser there could be. Suffering is associated with losing.

¹ See Elizabeth Johnson in WorkingPreacher.com, Commentary on Mark 8:27-38, 2018.

By suffering, Jesus does not mean the everyday suffering we all experience—the suffering of illness, the suffering of natural disasters, the suffering of having someone cut you off in traffic. For Jesus, suffering is the consequence of committing our lives for his sake. To take up our cross means to follow Jesus faithfully. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own. It means giving of ourselves so that others may experience God's love that is made known in Jesus Christ. Sacrificing your time, your energy, your resources (and possibly your life) for others is Christian suffering.

Suffering, even death, is not on our list of what we expect as Christians. However, it is the path of discipleship that follows our particular messiah. It is a path I will joyfully follow. Amen.